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ON THE ORIGIN OF THE GRETCHEN-THEME IN *FAUST*¹

The present investigation owes its origin to two but recently available publications, one by a Goethe scholar² of eminence, the other by a layman,³ whose work betrays the amateur but reveals an important truth.

The first is by Wilhelm Bode, author of the voluminous biography of Goethe, now appearing, whose skill in gathering and arranging material is seen to great advantage in this monograph, in which are sketched "the fortunes of Friederike Brion, before and after her death." Lest a fate as cruel as that of the Lesbian poetess in Attic Comedy overtake the poetical figure of Goethe's first love, the scholar Bode has curbed eulogy and caricature, he has parted truth from fiction in the array of literature that for more than a century has collected about the name of Friederike.

Beginning with the early family history of the Brions, Bode gathers together every item of information concerning Friederike and the young Goethe, contained in letters, poems, reports of conversations, interviews of survivors; he adds all the facts and circumstances about the acquaintance of the poet Lenz with Friederike, including the poems dedicated to her; then follows the story of the subsequent life of Friederike with her parents, as Goethe found them in 1779, which continued until 1787; then after the death of the parents, her migration with her sister Sophie to the Steinthal, where her brother, and later a relative by marriage, occupied the Protestant pulpit. The sisters at one time opened a little shop, selling pottery and woven wares. At all times Friederike was spoken of as good and charitable, as a kind godmother to children whose baptism she

¹ A paper read at the meeting of the Modern Language Association of America, at Baltimore, December 30, 1921.

² *Die Schicksale der Friederike Brion vor und nach ihrem Tode.* Von Wilhelm Bode. Berlin: E. S. Mittler u. Sohn, 1920.

³ *Das Urbild von Goethes Gretchen.* Von Otto v. Boenigk. Greifswald: Ratsbuchhandlung L. Bamberg, 1914.

is recorded to have witnessed, as a sort of loving aunt to the young, until she died April 3, 1813, beloved and respected, in her sixty-first year. Why had she never married? Perhaps because of her delicate health in the years of her youth, perhaps subsequently her taking care of her aging parents.

Bode attempts to draw a realistic picture of Friederike, very tall, pale, but animated and of personal charm, inclined to pulmonary trouble just as the young Goethe, who had just come through a battle for life. Aside from this handicap Goethe was not established in life and could not be seriously thinking of marriage. Their parting was necessarily a sad event in their young lives, as is not infrequently repeated in university towns, when college widows are left behind by charming young men of no immediate prospects. Lenz appeared as self-appointed successor to Goethe, but he destroyed what affection he may have awakened, by his mental attitude of unrestraint. The home of the Brions remained hospitable during the life of the parents, and among the guests were students of theology and officers. Friederike and her sisters always spoke well of Goethe. Bode proves beyond a question of doubt that to attempt to find the *motif* of the *Kindesmörderin* in the Sesenheim idyl is sheer folly or worse.

The second part of *Dichtung und Wahrheit* appeared in 1812, and contained the story of Goethe's disguise and introduction in Sesenheim. Friederike might have beheld there her portrait and the comparison with the Vicar of Wakefield's household. But it is most probable that she did not, for the poet's greatness and his works were alike unknown in the village communities of Alsace and Baden, where she spent her last years, and no one had heard of a bygone acquaintance between a student Goethe and the kindhearted old aunt. Nor had she ever appeared to them a forsaken, drooping flower—with all her gentleness she was alert and full of good humor, as her correspondence testifies to the last. During the last year of Friederike's life Goethe wrote the story of their love and chastised himself for desertion. Most probably he did not know¹ that she was

¹ Ph. Chr. Weyland, a brother of the Weyland who brought Goethe to Sesenheim, occupied a high position in the service of the Duke of Weimar, but the family correspondence reveals nothing of Friederike, and it is not probable that Goethe had news of Friederike through this source.

still living, though the memory of her haunted him like the song of Solveig. Remarkable is the coincidence, that on the day of Friederike's death we find an entry in Goethe's journal: *Biographie, Schluss des 3. Bandes*, denoting that the poet had completed on that day the third part of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, which contained the immortal literary tribute to her.

Nothing has hurt the reputation of Goethe more than his voluntary confession of guilt in leaving Friederike, an act paralleled so frequently in the lives of men of genius, and attributable so largely to the desire for self-development and independence. Goethe has well said: "Die Ursachen eines Mädchens, das sich zurückzieht, scheinen immer gültig, des Mannes niemals." The great historian Niebuhr was perhaps the first to express his disapproval of Goethe the man as a result of his self-confessed desertion. Very little was known at that time of Goethe's life, and while detractors were busy defaming alternately the character of the poet or Friederike, the classical philologist, August Näge, in 1822 made a pilgrimage to Sesenheim to examine the scene of the poet's love-story. Näge wished to trace two rumors to their source, the one, that Friederike had married a nobleman v. Dürkheim (this was a confusion with Lili Schöнемann), the other, that Goethe had a son by Friederike, and that the boy was compelled to enter an unworthy trade as pastry-baker in Strassburg. The latter rumor was traced to Pastor Schweppenhäuser of Sesenheim, who, though confessing that he had never himself had any personal acquaintance with any of the Brions, stated as a fact, that Friederike had been seduced by a Catholic priest, Reimbold (alias Reinbold, Rheinbold), that there had been a son, and that Goethe had discovered Friederike's fall at the time of his revisiting Sesenheim in 1779 and had thereby been deterred from his intention of marrying her. Reaction in favor of Friederike naturally set in after such appalling slanders, notably after the discovery of Salzmann's *Nachlass*, given to the public in 1838. Ludwig Tieck had already published a short story, *Der Mond-süchtige*, in 1831, based upon a probable visit to Strassburg and Sesenheim. Alsatian investigators started about the same time. A student of Professor Näge, at Bonn, Heinrich Kruse, in 1835 visited Sesenheim and found old Schweppenhäuser still alive but unwilling

to discuss the evil story he had circulated. He directed the inquirer to the oldest survivors among the peasants, who, however, sang the praises of the Brion family and particularly of Friederike, and on the ugly rumor the "Ochsenwirt" replied: "Das hat gewiss der alte Pfarrer gesagt, denn sonst weiss kein Mensch im ganzen Dorf etwas Andres als lauter Gutes von den Brions."

We may ignore the contemptible *Plaudereien* such as appeared from the pen of the feuilletonist Weil and others in the *Leipziger Zeitung für die Elegante Welt*. Düntzer refuted them and also laid bare certain forgeries. The battle was on again after 1870, when Alsace became politically a part of Germany, and Catholics and Protestants made of the matter an interchurch controversy. An arbiter was thought to be found in a person denominationally unbiased, Dr. Johannes Froitzheim, of Jewish descent, who had been transferred to Strassburg and was interested in local historical personages. But he also had an axe to grind, for he fixed his cannons against the Goetheaner, the exclusive guild of Goethe Philologen under the leadership of Erich Schmidt. Froitzheim was a painstaking investigator, but all that he could find was, that in 1787 an illegitimate child was baptized in Strassburg with parents named as Franziska Wallner and Johann Blumenhold. The Abbé Reimbold(t), curate of Sesenheim, had brought the child to Strassburg. With these facts Froitzheim constructed an argument that Reimbold must have been the father of the child—Friederike, being also of Sesenheim, was the mother; they assumed different names at the baptism. Upon such a flimsy stock the poisonous flower of Froitzheim's argumentation grew, and his vile purpose of dragging into the mire a most beautiful literary tradition was often imitated. Erich Schmidt attacked the perpetrator most bitterly and Froitzheim deservedly fell into disrepute as an investigator.¹

It will not be necessary to follow Bode's outline of succeeding investigations, they add little more to our knowledge of the subject. The good character of Friederike is clearly established, and Goethe's

¹ The title of the monograph was: *Friederike von Sesenheim, nach geschichtlichen Quellen*. Von Joh. Froitzheim. Gotha, Perthes, 1892. The writer of this paper carefully examined this and many other works enumerated and outlined by Bode (mostly found only in German libraries), and bears witness to the accuracy of his reproductions and to his judicial attitude.

confession was a noble and generous act. We cannot possibly find the model for the *Kindesmörderin* here.

The other very suggestive work, *Das Urbild von Goethes Gretchen*, though amateurish in method, points the way toward a solution of the problem. The author, Otto v. Boenigk, is confident that he has found the original for Goethe's Gretchen. He found her in the chronicles of the city of Stralsund. Her name was Maria Flint. The city was under Swedish régime and a large number of soldiers were quartered there. Maria Flint was a shoemaker's daughter. She was seduced by a young Swedish officer, who left her. Her parents died before the birth of her child, from grief at the loss of the family honor. The soldiers were supreme and no redress was possible. The forsaken girl was confronted with the terrible disgrace of public penance, the loss of position and all the respect that made life worth living, and in despair she killed her child at the risk of even more monstrous punishment, for impalement, burial alive, drowning under torture were inflicted in those cruel times; decapitation was considered a mild form of punishment for the offense of child murder. From the cloister to which presumably Maria had fled for protection, came the rumor that she had killed her child. The town council took up the case and threw her into prison. Lieutenant Johann Dycke of the Husars was not the worst of men, and he offered the prison warden 700 Reichstaler for her release, but the keeper would not take the bribe. The case became a struggle between the authority of the city government and the arrogant soldiery. Maria Flint was sentenced to death by decapitation, and the reckless young Johann Dycke vowed he would break open the prison. True to his word, during the early morning hours of October 28, at the head of a band of men in disguise with blackened faces, he overpowered the guard stationed in doubled numbers in and about the prison, and set the condemned young woman free. Great excitement reigned the day following and the aggrieved Ratsherren appealed to Stockholm for protection against the military. The leaders were punished with a transfer to Sweden, including Lieutenant Johann Dycke. A search was made for the escaped prisoner, advertisements for her apprehension appeared not only in the newspaper of Stralsund, but of many other cities also—but no trace of the missing woman could be found.

But a miracle came to pass! On December 2 Stralsund was again thrown into consternation, Maria Flint had appeared at the prison doors and asked to have the sentence executed upon her. She declared she had been in service in Dresden and other places, but everywhere she had been haunted by the fear of discovery and had never had peace. "Es ist so elend, in der Fremde schweifen, Und sie werden mich doch ergreifen." She regretted her flight, but refused to name anyone who had taken part in her rescue. She refused to see her lover; the sincerity of her remorse made a deep impression. Strangely none of the Ratsherren thought of pardon. Instead, fearing another rescue, they put stronger bars on the windows and laid chains upon her hands. December 20, 1765, was the day of execution, and exactly as Goethe's words describe the scene: "Die Menge drängt sich, man hört sie nicht. Der Platz, die Gassen können sie nicht fassen," the cold-blooded ceremony was performed in every detail, though popular sympathy was altogether with the stouthearted, repentant woman. The law had to have its blood-sacrifice.

The parallel with Gretchen's seduction, remorse, and refusal to flee with her lover is very startling, and Boenigk claims that Goethe must have heard of this case while he was a student at Leipzig. It is quite possible, though the proof is lacking. But the important fact is, that at this time, all over Central Europe and beyond, the cruelty and injustice with which punishment for the crime of child murder was inflicted upon the woman and the woman alone, was beginning to arouse public sentiment. Just so about a century before the barbarity of witchburnings and tortures to extract confessions before court, stirred opposition and finally brought abolition. Now, i.e., especially in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, the minds of young writers were inflamed by this lurid phase of social injustice, and they produced a whole category of dramas, novels, lyrics and essays on the theme of the child-murderess. The "Stürmer und Dränger" were most productive: Heinrich Leopold Wagner wrote *Die Kindesmörderin*, Reinhold Lenz, *Der Hofmeister* and *Die Soldaten*, Maler Müller, *Nusskernen*, above all Goethe his first part of *Faust*. The poet Bürger wrote a ballad, had plans for a drama on this theme,

and was busily engaged on one of the conspicuous trial cases of infanticide, for which he prepared an abstract. A prize of one hundred ducats was offered in 1781 by Dalberg, the director of the Mannheim theater, for the best discussion of the subject: "What are the best means of preventing infanticide without promoting prostitution." It is said, four hundred essays were handed in, and three prizes were awarded. Three dozen of the essays were noticed in the *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek*. J. G. Schlosser, Goethe's brother-in-law, competed unsuccessfully, but published his work in 1785, *Die Wudbianer, eine nicht gekrönte Preisschrift über die Frage, etc.* Pestalozzi was interested and published something on the subject in 1782. Examples might be multiplied.¹ It is interesting to note that the fifty-fifth of Goethe's Latin examination theses at Strassburg was: *Ob ein Frauenzimmer, das ein neugeborenes Kind töte, zu köpfen sei, ist eine unter den Rechtslehrern streitige Frage.* The story of the forsaken girl that drowns herself in despair, is told with deep human insight by Goethe in the first book of *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*. The whole subject of seduction and infanticide was before Goethe's mind from its legal and human aspects during the period 1770-75, when the Gretchen theme assumed form.

It is clear from the foregoing that we should not seek the origin of the Gretchen tragedy in the life of Friederike Brion, nor in the personal experiences of Goethe, but in the awakening of a humanitarian sentiment characteristic of the period of Goethe's early manhood, when a large number of young writers introduced the theme of the child-murderess into literature with conscious or unconscious purpose. Goethe alone created a great work of art upon the theme, his contemporaries wrote drastic but ephemeral propagandist literature now almost forgotten.

In view of the many errors that have been made in attempting to find the original for Gretchen, Goethe scholars might take warning against a method that seeks too narrowly to find a friend or acquaintance behind every one of Goethe's poetical creations. Even where it

¹ An excellent study of the origin and growth of public sentiment on this subject, also an historical survey of the severe punishments inflicted, can be found in the monograph of O. H. Werner, *The Unmarried Mother in German Literature*, Columbia University Dissertation, 1917.

is clearly proved that the poet did use his friends as models, as in *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, it is the picture of eighteenth-century sentimentalism, it is the antithesis of the emotional and rational elements, and the broad basis of human experience which defies the destruction of time. In a recent essay on *Werther* complaint is made of the prevalence of treatments from without instead of from within; in a renewed edition of F. Th. Vischer's *Goethe's Faust* (1920), the motto of the original editor is emphasized: "Den Stoff durchforschen und den Geist im Stoffe erkennen." The key to the origin of the Gretchen theme is found in a study of the social conditions of the time. This suggests many possible interpretations of Goethe's works from a neglected point of view.

ALBERT B. FAUST

CORNELL UNIVERSITY